BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Franklin Odo

"If you don't control your own culture, and your own vision of life, and your own participation in life, then you don't control anything. And that's what we're about. We're trying to---the true spirit of any kind of democracy is to have people be autonomous at the same time that they know that they're dependent on the community around them. And I think culture and art kinds of activities are one, not the only, but one really exciting and important way of doing that."

Franklin Odo was born in 1939 in Liliha, O'ahu. He grew up in what is now Hawai'i Kai and graduated in 1957 from Kaimukī High School. He received his bachelor's degree in Asian and American history from Princeton University, his master's degree in East Asian studies from Harvard University, and his doctorate in Japanese history from Princeton University.

Odo taught at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1968 to 1972 and at California State University at Long Beach from 1972 to 1977. In 1978, he returned to Hawai'i to become director of the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawai'i, a position he still holds.

Odo became a board member of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts in 1981 and served as its chair from 1986 to 1989.

Tape No. 20-19-1-90 and 20-20-1-90

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Franklin Odo (FO)

August 14, 1990

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Joe Rossi (JR)

JR: This is an interview with Franklin Odo, conducted August 14, 1990, on the University of Hawai'i campus. The interviewer is Joe Rossi.

Dr. Odo, let's begin with your youth. Where and when were you born?

FO: Nineteen thirty-nine, Liliha. My parents had a small grocery store, so I was born on the second floor above that. But during the war [i.e., World War II] my folks moved, closed down the grocery store, moved into what is now Hawai'i Kai—Koko Head, we called it. Very rural, back in where the Kamiloiki [Elementary] School is now, where that little saddle road goes over into the next valley, into Kalama Valley. That's where our farm was. We had a vegetable farm, truck crop. So from about '43 until the time I graduated from high school in '57, that's where I lived.

JR: And what schools did you go to?

FO: Wai'alae Elementary, Lili'uokalani [Elementary School] . . .

JR: There was no Kamiloiki [Elementary] School back then?

FO: No, no. Those were the closest schools—Kaimukī Intermediate and Kaimukī High. Those were the closest schools.

JR: Was there a bus that took you?

FO: Well, you know, in the very early days—this is like telling your kids how tough things were (laughs)—the bus used to stop outside of Lunalilo Home Road, on the highway. But I can't remember when the buses started coming into Lunalilo Home Road, to the end of Lunalilo Home Road. And we were like half a mile or three-quarters of a mile away from that bus stop, so it wasn't that far. But for quite a while, we carpooled in the morning to get us to Kalaniana'ole Highway [to the bus stop outside of Lunalilo Home Road]. And then we'd walk back. So that was about two-and-a-half miles in. . . . Through the snow, uphill both ways.

(Laughter)

JR: I know Hawai'i Kai gets a lot of snow.

FO: Yeah, right, right.

JR: What were your early interests? Were they sports?

FO: Anything that would get me away from working on the farm. So I did everything. I did sports, I did every club I could join—Boy Scouts, YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. Because it was just---it was just not much fun, you know, working on the farm. So my parents felt it was worthwhile for me to get into things, so I'd tell 'em I was gonna go to the library or do community service things, practice football. So I played football, baseball, ran some track through high school, did student government, did Hi-Y, 4-H clubs, Boy Scouts, played in the band. (Chuckles)

JR: What did you play?

FO: Well, until about the ninth grade I played the clarinet—badly.

(Laughter)

JR: So other than a poor clarinet player, did you have any other interests in music?

FO: Yeah, sure. Listening, you know. I was not a very good musician, ever.

JR: What kind of music?

FO: Popular, some classical. I mean, my dad was an interesting fellow. He was born on Kaua'i, but was taken back to Japan at an early age, grew up there, had a year of college in Japan, and came back to the United States—to Hawai'i. But he was always—and this was the thirties, when he came back—but he was always very interested in Western cultural things. He played the violin—took it up by himself and got some lessons. And his favorite music was Western classical music. So we had some of that stuff around.

JR: What about other types of art forms?

FO: Popular art forms, whatever dance was going on—popular cultural things, I guess. But the household was such that---my parents were always concerned about providing a wide range of experiences, so books of different kinds of things or records of different types of things. So we were exposed to a lot of different approaches to looking at life. And I had---in terms of elementary school, I do still remember my art teacher, Minnie Fujita, who's still around, (chuckles) and who, you know, became quite a good artist in Honolulu—Hawai'i circles. But I was never very good at it. I mean, I used to like to dabble, but you know. . . .

JR: Do you have any recollection of what the art class consisted of?

FO: Sure, sure. They did a pretty good job, I think. A lot of clay, a lot of hands-on things. Earlier, I think they did a better job. The DOE [Department of Education] did a better job when I was in school than they're doing now for my kids, from what I can see. I mean, they integrated art education with a lot of things that you could see, feel, touch, smell, taste, on a constant basis. And we had music. We had band from third, fourth, fifth, sixth grades on. And they just don't have that stuff now. And I'm not sure whether it's a combination of philosophy and finances or just finances. But I know they've cut out a lot of stuff that we had access to.

JR: Did the arts continue through high school or was it something that ended after elementary school?

FO: The formal exposure to that kind of stuff pretty much ended, except for band for a couple of years in intermediate schools. But that was one thing, you know, movies, things that we didn't consider to be art then. Movies as an art form—cinema.

(Laughter)

FO: But we were avid cinema-goers, you know. We critiqued films—the high school buddies, on the way home, stopping at a drive-in with a root beer float.

JR: Did you have any interests in things that back then you would have considered art?

FO: Yeah, yeah sure. We were---this was America, you know. I mean, if you had any imagination at all and you were ambitious at all, you understood from television, from your books, from your teachers—the whole world told you that art and culture was high Western art and culture. And so if you wanted to do anything in life, you had to master or at least be conversant with those things. So yeah, I was a fairly ambitious kid. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew that I didn't want to be on a farm. And I did want to be able to have access to more than Hawai'i, so I knew that I would have to—we knew, those of us who were gonna go somewhere, that we would have to learn the stuff.

JR: Other than the Western arts, what about any traditional cultural . . .

FO: Like Japanese arts and stuff?

JR: Yeah.

FO: Very little. Both my parents were born here and were reared and educated in Japan. So they're both bicultural and bilingual. So that was a very fortunate kind of thing. Everybody was assimilationist in that period. They, for example, never encouraged me to study Japanese or, you know, learn the traditional Japanese art forms. It was just---in their minds, it wasn't necessary, and it might take away from making it in American society faster and better. So that was never a value in

my family. So it's kind of ironic that I went into it a little bit later. But it was always there. I mean, those were also books, and photographs, and pictures, and magazines, and journals, and things. So as poor as we were, it was kind of available to me.

JR: In talking to someone like Alfred Preis, he characterizes the [Honolulu] Academy [of Arts] and places like that as primarily *Haole* institutions at this time. Would you agree with that?

FO: Oh sure. Those places---in our day, those were field trips, you know, Bishop Museum or the academy of arts. Once a year you go hear the symphony. In that period, though, they were widely regarded as, in the old-fashioned way, temples of culture. And so we were fairly acquiescent, I think, in accepting that judgement. And so we did go expecting to find something, and we did accept that value judgement—this is art, you know. This is high art, and this is what we should aspire to and all that.

JR: Whether you liked or not.

FO: Yeah, right, right. Whether it relates to you or not, and whether it relates to anybody or not. And in some remarkable ways I think some of the good things about that did rub off, so I don't think it was a totally wasted venture.

JR: You mentioned wanting to get off the farm.

FO: Yeah.

JR: Did you know what area you wanted to get into?

FO: No, no. I used to joke about, when I went to college, that I wanted to either be—I like to eat, so I was going to be an attorney or a chef. (Chuckles) I was either gonna cook the stuff for myself, or I was gonna have enough money to eat whatever I wanted to. But no, I had no idea what I was going to do. I thought I was going to be rich, though. (Laughs) We all make mistakes.

(Laughter)

JR: So how did you get to the Mainland?

FO: Oh, combination of things, I guess. The year before me, class of '56, there was a young man named David Tamashiro who went to Harvard [University]. And I never knew that somebody from Kaimukī could go to an Ivy League school. I just never had thought of that. And I said, "Oh shit. If he can do it, maybe by some strange combination of things. . . ." My grades were good, but not superlative. I tested fairly well. I had read a lot. And I'd done enough stuff so my letters of reference and stuff were very good. And I was a student-leader type. I mean, I was the kind—the all-around type that the Ivys were interested in then. And those were the days before affirmative action. And so the fact that they were, on their

own, trying to find a diverse student body helped me. If I had competed with kids in the mid-Atlantic region or something, I don't think I would have fared very well. But the guy who interviewed me for Princeton [University], an architect, prided himself on kind of seeing local kids who were diamonds in the rough and Pygmalion stuff. You find kids who can do something and give them the opportunity. And he did think that it was good for Princeton to have kids like me involved. I think also I was---I think I learned somewhere—maybe junior high, high school—how to be a snowman, you know, how to impress people.

JR: Oh.

(Laughter)

FO: How to do an interview. I mean, I never had any lessons. It's something that I just picked up.

JR: So that helped you along.

FO: Yeah, yeah.

JR: If I could just back up a second, what authors were you reading when you were younger?

FO: I read a lot. Now, that was one of the. . . . Backtrack a bit. Koko Head is a very dry area, especially in the valley. So water was a main problem in growing crops. The city water system was very slow, and for most of the day we got very little water. So we'd either have to be up there irrigating the fields for a long, long time or create a small reservoir of your own and then pump the water out and so on. Both of which techniques required someone to be there to watch. And so on a number of occasions, while my parents said, "While you're watering the field you could be hoeing some weeds over here, or cutting some grass over there, or planting some"—you know, doing something else—I'd take a book if they couldn't see me, sit in the shade, and read. And that got to be a habit pretty quick. So I read a lot. As a young kid I read a lot of Indian stories and Zane Grey and science fiction. Later on, all kinds of things. And the school system, the school curriculum, wasn't bad. I mean, we did go through a lot of Shakespeare and that kind of thing.

JR: Was that the kind of thing you'd take with you to watch the field being watered?

FO: No, not Shakespeare. No, no, no. I wasn't . . . (Laughs) No, I'd take adventure stuff or science fiction things. But everything, I find out later---the whole thing about language is just having absorbed a lot of it. And not just quality things—what we call quality things—but just a vast amount of how you put words together, or how different people put words together, or how to make sense out of a word that you don't know. And you don't have a dictionary up in the fields, right, so you have to deal with context. So that was good training.

JR: Having read that much, were you surprised by anything when you got to the

Mainland?

FO: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I was totally unprepared for Princeton. I mean, I almost flunked out. (Laughs) I studied for my midterms—I remember this very well—the way I studied for Kaimukī High School. And I got the equivalent---the grading system was different then, but I got the equivalents of Ds and D-minuses, and maybe one C-plus or something. I said, "Oh man, all these people gave me leis [when I left Hawai'i for college]." I was the local hero, leaving Princeton for—I mean, leaving Kaimukī High School for Princeton. So I said, "This gonna be very embarrassing when I flunk out."

(Laughter)

FO: So I started studying in a little different way. But obviously, it helped.

JR: And what did you end up majoring in?

FO: History, Asian and American history.

JR: Were you coming back during the summers?

FO: I came back two out of the four. One of the other summers I went to Italy, which was actually a very influential part of my life. I stayed with an Italian family in a program called the Experiment in International Living. You live with a family. And this particular family had no one who spoke English, so I had to learn conversational Italian real fast. (Laughs) So I lived with them for a month. And that was an extraordinary experience. . . . About teaching about Western civilization and some of the older things. I lived in a place called Ascoli Piceno, which is just northeast of Rome and a very old city. So just living in that kind of setting for a while was very important to me. But it also helped convince me I should look back into my own background. So when I went back—this was the summer between sophomore and junior years in college—I started, you know, studying Chinese and doing Asian history.

JR: And is that what sparked the interest in graduate school?

FO: Yeah, yeah. Then '61, when I graduated, that happened to be the first year—so I see a lot of combination of things, of chance and fortune. That was the first year the nation implemented the congressional bills to support people to learn foreign languages, National Defense Foreign Languages monies. Lots of money was being pumped into learning foreign languages. This was in response to the Soviet threat and the *Sputnik* thing and the whole Russian—the Russians were being much more effective than we in recruiting in the ideological war in the Third World. So there were like ninety-something languages. If you studied them—including Japanese, Chinese, Urdu, and everything, Portuguese. Americans were much worse than we are even now. So they gave us a lot of money to study these exotic foreign languages. So I took one of them and went to Harvard to study Chinese and Japanese.

JR: Did that involve any overseas . . .

FO: Later. [In nineteen] sixty-three, after I graduated with a master's in East Asian regional studies, I went to Japan for a year of language study. Then that convinced me that I really did want to do Japan rather than China. I went back to Princeton, did a Ph.D. in Japanese History.

JR: How did you like living in Japan for a year?

FO: I liked it, I liked it. It was hard. I mean, the language was difficult, so it was pretty rigorous language training. But it was interesting to take a look at this country of my ancestors. I liked it.

JR: So how did you settle in California after . . .

FO: (Laughs) Well that was a . . .

JR: . . . the East Coast?

FO: Yeah, that was a job. Then from '64, I guess, I went back to Princeton, stayed there couple of years, went back to Japan one more time, one more year, to do research for my doctoral dissertation, then went back to Princeton for another year, and in '68 started teaching at Occidental College, Los Angeles. So that's how come California. Then we got into that whole Third World student strikes, and anti-Vietnam War, and all that radical activity. Civil rights and anti-war stuff took up a lot of my life.

JR: How so?

FO: Well, in being involved in, participating in, and leading anti-war and civil rights things. It was more fun than just teaching class.

JR: Did Mom and Dad know what you were involved in?

FO: Well, I think they knew a fair amount. And I'd come home with---prior to that, I had come home with nehru jackets and beads and long hair. So they knew.

(Laughter)

FO: So they weren't surprised. But I think it was easier to be a radical away from home. No question. I have a lot of respect for the young people who were radicals here when they had to go home at night, watch themselves on the six o'clock news burning their draft cards and. . . . Yeah, that was tough. So it was, in that sense, relatively easier. But you know, we were still putting our jobs on the line, and it wasn't easy.

JR: Speaking of the racial activities, was that primarily Black . . .

FO: In the beginning. In the beginning, but what I was involved in. . . . By the late sixties, those of us who were involved in Asian American things—I mean, if black was beautiful, then what is yellow? Or who are we? And how did this work? And what we found was that, you know, ain't nobody gonna do it for us. The Blacks had their hands full trying to find some kind of decency—decent treatment—on their own. So we had to take the initiative and try to get courses established. So there were lots of sit-ins all over the country, primarily West Coast, by Asian American students and faculty trying to get administrations to provide a course or some support. And to some extent it worked. We did get some resources. So that's what I was doing. So that eventually got me to move my fields from traditional Asian studies—China, Japan—to Asian American studies, which essentially was American society and American race relations.

JR: Was that a relatively new field at the time?

FO: It was absolutely new, yeah, yeah. We thought of ourselves as---we were self-consciously radical and/or revolutionary. I mean, we knew that we were doing battle with fundamental tenets of American society that were damaging to us and negative for the whole society. So yeah, we had a sense of—a real kind of sense of vision that we were about to transform at least the university or the community and eventually, you know, the society.

JR: Having grown up in Hawai'i, how do you think your perspective on this racial conflict or tension related to, say, your fellow Asian Americans who grew up in California or wherever?

FO: Yeah, we thought about that a lot. It's an interesting question. Nobody's really---everybody deals with that question. I don't know that there are any really good answers. I can tell you some patterns that have emerged. A lot of the leaders of the Asian American movement have come from Hawai'i. That's one thing. People, I think, have acknowledged that people from Hawai'i tend to be more comfortable with themselves, more open, less restricted, less prone to conduct themselves like a minority person—paranoid, which is a normal state. When you're a real small minority, paranoia is a healthy reaction, because people are out to get you. In a racist society, they are out to get you. And in Hawai'i, where we had grown up—in Kaimukī High School, for example, in my graduating class of 700-something there were no more than a handful of Caucasians, of European Americans. And so everybody's colored, you know. Even if you're down on the plantation, there's a kind of a social setting in which you become student body president, as I was. You know, that kind of thing. You get leadership training. You're not shunted away. You don't---you may have racist ideas or stereotypes of standards of beauty. This is Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, to give you the context. So those are beautiful, and we were not. And so we'd go around trying to do something to our eyes to make 'em bigger or put grease sticks on our hair, make 'em go back a little farther. So we didn't escape the racism, but there was a really different kind of sense of being in a larger social context in which you could be comfortable. And I think that made a difference.

JR: You mentioned the—such a small minority on the Mainland as compared to the people in Hawai'i. Did those folks on the Mainland then not have Japanese—or whatever—traditional practices and community events and things like this?

FO: No, they did actually. I think in both places all those kinds of traditional Japanese events were suppressed until the late forties. But really, by a few years after the war ended—I'd say '48, '49—you really had a number of people beginning to bring back the activities. So I guess what it tells me is people really have a need to do this kind of stuff. And some of them have been practicing it secretly in their own household. And even during the war I think people did that sort of thing. But openly, by the late forties—by the early fifties, you saw a lot of that.

JR: Were traditional arts part of your political doctrine, so to speak?

FO: No, no. In the early period---this has changed some. Maybe it changes in the seventies. Maybe mid-seventies on we begin to see, those of us doing political movements, or community movements, or academic movements on campuses—the early emphasis was really political. We're talking about political economy. We're talking about power. We're talking about realpolitik. For most of us, I think, cultural activities were fluff. In Marxist terminology, it's epiphenomena. It's the stuff that's---it's not the real nitty grit of class conflict. So people who just did cultural, we tended to disparage and say, "Nah, that's not the real. . . . The real (power) comes out of the barrel of a gun."

By the mid-seventies, I think a lot of us beginning to see that culture is really an integral part of human beings, and there's no reason we should give up the culture. We're beginning to see people won't give it up even if you tell them to anyway. And it's not just tea ceremony. People have developed our own forms of cultural practices and cultural values, forged out of a hundred years of existence as a group here, not as immigrants and not just as second-generation descendants of immigrants, but as a whole community which has come up through—from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

So just looking at the Japanese American example, for instance, then we could see that, hey, this is a way to reach people, tell people about our own experiences, and that cultural expression and perpetuation was a very important part of that. But we were---it took us seven, eight years, I think, to realize that.

JR: And you were teaching throughout . . .

FO: Yeah.

JR: . . . that period.

FO: Yeah. UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles] for a couple of years—'70 to '72—and then [California State University at] Long Beach until '78. Seventy-eight is when I came home to UH [University of Hawai'i].

JR: Was that a transfer to the UH at that point?

FO: Yeah, yeah. I left Long Beach and took a position in ethnic studies.

JR: And what specifically did you think, coming back to Hawai'i?

FO: Well, I had been thinking about coming home for some time. One of the tenets of Asian American studies or ethnic studies was praxis. You don't just teach things, you don't just learn things, you don't just publish stuff. You try to put into practice what you learn, what you teach. This is not simply an ivory-tower exercise. You have to make it count, because there are too many people hurting out there. I mean, this is a real-life situation that you have to have a hand in improving. So the closer you are to your community, whichever community it is that you want to work with, the more you can relate to it, the more you understand it, the more effective you should be, theoretically, in helping them see their own dilemmas, helping them become "empowered"—a big word for us. Not to lead them somewhere, but to help them participate in a process of becoming leaders themselves, so that you're not needed anymore. To make yourself obsolete, to the extent that you can.

And I was doing a lot of that with the Asian American community in Los Angeles, and enjoying it and doing fairly well at it, we thought. But there's always more you can do, you know. You always think about what it is that you can do better. And if the theory that the closer you are, the more you understand your community, the better you'll be able to do your political work—if that theory holds, then I would have had a much better opportunity to exercise that kind of ability if I were to work in Hawai'i. Because this is where I grew up. These are the people I know best. That's the situation I know best.

So I'd been thinking for maybe seven, eight years about coming home. And had, in fact, inquired with the history department, with ethnic studies, to see whether there might be positions available. And always the answer was no, until '78, when they, in fact, went on a search. And so I applied.

I came home partly because, as I said, I could work better with a community I knew. But Hawai'i was a place where ethnic struggles—like in Chinatown or Waiāhole, Waikāne—were succeeding. Where a lot of the stuff that we were doing on the West Coast were symbolic and important but they were losing. And that was getting a little old. So it was nice to think about being on the winning side for a while.

But the other thing I thought was that the Japanese community in particular was at a very unusual and dangerous position. They were in a place where they were perceived as, and were going to be perceived as, in control of the state. Where, in the kind of analysis I had become accustomed to—that is, looking at the political economy, who owns the means of production, which classes are in control—local Japanese Americans were nowhere in that. So it seemed to me that it was—first of all, that perception was going to be wrong, and that it would make very good sense

for people to scapegoat Japanese Americans because they would be a highly vulnerable group. And second, that they would---given the misinformation they were getting, they were highly vulnerable to believing all this stuff—that they were in control—and start acting like that, when they don't actually have the power. And that's really stupid and can really lead to a lot of damage. So I thought that it was important that this particular community have a number of different options to choose from in analyzing who they were and where they were going. So that was one of the things that intrigued me.

JR: While you were away on the Mainland for those twenty years, what a lot of people consider [to be] the Hawaiian renaissance occurred. It's still occurring, I think a lot of people would argue. But were you aware of that when you were on the Mainland? And when you came back, did you notice it or anything like that?

FO: I had been aware. I mean, we had passed through at least once a year or once every two years. We'd come back and visit my family. So I was aware of something like this happening. But coming back to live was a real eye-opener. I mean, it was very different. And the whole thing of—at least an option to treat native Hawaiian people and the culture and the history with some respect was, to me, a totally new way of looking at this place. Yeah, I could see that the situation had turned around, you know, dramatically. Not everybody agreed with that, and we still have lots of folks who don't believe in this at all. But when I was growing up through the fifties, that perspective wasn't even available. So even if you might have been swayed by it, it didn't reach you. So yeah, to me that's a phenomenal change.

JR: When you were growing up, did you have any exposure to authentic Hawaiian arts and crafts?

FO: Some, some. It's very hard, I think, not to get exposed to some things—neighbors, family hulas, you know, some places where hulas were performed, some luaus, family-type things, some native Hawaiian friend who would let you into something. But very fragmented, disorganized, not in a coherent kind of package. So some foods, or some legend, or, "There's this here." Something every six months? I mean, not enough to sensitize you to how much there was. So most of us—the vast, vast majority—grew up thinking there was not much to Hawaiian people or Hawaiian culture.

JR: What area of ethnic studies did you begin working in when you returned to Hawai'i? Was it to continue the Asian American . . .

FO: Yeah, yeah. And specifically I was able to focus in more on the Japanese in Hawai'i, rather than Asian Americans as a whole racial group or even more than the Japanese in America. And there was a lot—there's a lot of material here. And fortunately all that Asia training that I had—learning to read the language—was for me crucial, 'cause it allowed me to take a look at the immigrants' writings. And there's a lot of stuff—from newspapers, to diaries, to songs and all the rest—that are really only exploitable by someone who has the technical skills that I managed to get when I was in another field, but combined with someone who has an interest

in the particular experiences of the immigrants. And that's a rare combination. And I think now we have to develop students who are interested in the field and encourage them to acquire the skills, like language or statistics or whatever disciplinary skills they need.

JR: We begin moving into the SFCA [State Foundation on Culture and the Arts] work that you did. Do you remember when you first became aware of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts and any of the projects that it was doing?

FO: No, there's no kind of sudden thing. I think it was always a peripheral institution. It was not particularly important to me in the period between '78 and '80, say, the first couple of years I was here. But that's partly because I was so engrossed in fighting the [university] administration and doing—trying to keep the program alive, and working with my colleagues, and learning my job. About 1980, '81, I started hearing more and more about this outfit.

JR: What did you hear then?

FO: Oh, primarily that it was not particularly responsive to local and non-White cultural institutions and traditions. In '79 or so—'79, '80—I got involved in a fairly close way with Hideo Okada—Major Okada—and the Waipahu Cultural Garden Park and their efforts to create kind of a sugar plantation village—you know, recapture that tradition. And it was multi-cultural, multi-racial, and it had, from the beginning, a broad vision of what they wanted to preserve—everyday life, common people's lives. Preserve that and perpetuate that for future generations. So I did a slide show for them. Took me into the old photographs, taking a look at all the different ethnic groups, how they lived, and what to capture—what images to use. So a lot of things like the music or the dance or the foods began to make more sense to me as part of—people weren't just work and politics, you know.

Trying to figure out why the state foundation wasn't helping an outfit like that, I think, was what got me interested there. And it turns out, in fact, that Major Okada, who was an important part of the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] and Democratic party. . . . I've never been told this directly, but my guess is that he was instrumental in having the governor [George Ariyoshi] appoint me to the state foundation. And he would have been---he's the only man I know who had sufficient clout to have effected that. So I think it's no accident that it's 1981 that I'm asked to sit on the board.

JR: Was it a shock or surprise?

FO: Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, it was very much. And I knew the labor union guys and ILWU folks and so on, and they had been putting some other people forward as candidates. And they were surprised. So it was an interesting. . . .

JR: Did you have any awareness that you were . . .

FO: No, no.

JR: . . . a candidate? Or was it that you got a phone call one day?

FO: Yeah, yeah. I just got a call indicating that the governor would ask me to serve on this board. At that time I still did not know really how much funding there was, how the funding got appropriated, who the rest of the people on the board were, who the staff was, and that kind of stuff. I was pretty raw.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JR: Dr. Odo, why do you think you were appointed to the SFCA?

FO: Well, if I'm right about my assumption about Major, to see that local culture—that is to say non-White, common people's culture—had an advocate on the board. I think it was that simple. I think Major understood that the park itself might be helped in some way, you know, because of my close association with them. But I think, broadly speaking, that's—that was one important aspect of it. But I wasn't the first non-*Haole* on the board, so I don't see that I was placed there to turn the whole thing around. Nobody, I hope, was that naive.

JR: What was the status of the SFCA when you joined, if you had to sum it up in a paragraph or so?

FO: The agency, as an agency, has always, I think, done quite good work. People were acquiring works of art—the 1 percent groups [i.e., Art in Public Places]. People were acquiring works of art, encouraging people to do exhibitions to produce work. There was a humanities section in place, underfunded but in place. There was arts in education going on. All of which were proceeding—and grants-in-aid, you know. People were being supported for their work. It was like---the main impression I had, I think, was it's a shame that it's not jelled, that there isn't a sense of teamwork, that it seemed factionalized, it seemed set apart from most of the community, it seemed not to be able to generate a positive energy that would allow the whole staff and the whole board to work in the same direction.

There were two people who came on at the same time, Dennis Toyomura and myself. And I don't know whether you'll interview Dennis. If you haven't yet, you should. He and I, I think, became perceived as the two watchdog, white—so to speak—knights of the local groups who were going to catch the executive director [Sarah Richards] and all her shenanigans—you know, stealing money away from local people and all that. And I think that, at the time, there was this sense that Dennis and I were being extremely disruptive. And I think we were, in different ways, in trying to make the board look at the public perception of us as an agency. Because I think the board wasn't altogether cognizant of how negative the perceptions were—or Sarah, herself. And that's a function of being extraordinarily busy, doing very good work in some areas, and having to—and not being able to do

everything. So I guess I defined my job at the time as being kind of the Ralph Nader of . . . (Laughs)

JR: Hawai'i's arts community.

FO: Yeah, yeah. And seeing, you know---gee, to what extent is this? I was hearing all kinds of things about arbitrary and illegal or unethical kinds of actions being taken by the board or by the executive director.

JR: Was this just in conversation with people or . . .

FO: Yeah, yeah. So you start looking at the procedures of the board, and you look at process. And then you say, "Well now, why are we doing an exhibition at Punahou [School] when it's not a state-supported institution?" Or, "How does this come to be?" Or, "Why are we allocating so many funds to the symphony and not, you know, to Waipahu?" Lot of discussions that took place like that. But in the process of that, I think what I learned was that it wasn't as simple as I thought, that it was a very complex agency—we were, in fact, supporting many local groups above and beyond the level I thought we were—and that the staff was fairly open to a lot of different ideas and were encouraging many groups to participate. The morale was not good, and obviously the gap between the ED [executive director] and the staff was horrendous. And it never, I think, improved very much.

JR: Sarah Richards was fairly new on the board—on the SFCA—also when you came aboard.

FO: Right, right. I think she'd only been there a year or so. So she was new to the game and. . . . Yeah, I gave her a bad time. (Chuckles)

JR: Do you want to tell me about that?

FO: Well, just in the sense that it was always---if you see yourself as a watchdog, and who you're watching is the ED, you're always on the lookout for things that might have been amiss. When you're running that complex an agency, there are always mistakes you make. But in the end, I think I came to have a lot of respect for her abilities and also for the complexity of the situation, where maybe, given where the staff was, the history of the agency, I'm not sure anybody could have put that agency together. I think very quickly she was forced into a situation where she gave up on that, that it looked like it was impossible.

JR: Where did the rest of the board and the chairman fit in this dynamic?

FO: In this early period, [chairperson] Naomi [Morita] was running her whole outfit on the Big Island in Hilo [Morita was a curriculum specialist with the Department of Education], dealing with her husband who was not in good health, trying to keep, you know, keep things together. I think from her point of view, she had these two curmudgeons—Toyomura and Odo—making a lot of trouble on the board. And she would have been delighted to just see us disappear somewhere most of the time. I

think she knew that Sarah, basically, was taking care of the kind of business that the board wanted her to take care of. And the other part, that is to say the morale problems and the situation and the distrust among the staff, Naomi didn't want to have anything to do with that. And she was just smart enough to understand that if you got into that, it would be extraordinarily difficult to get out of it. And I think she just, at that point, I think, wisely determined that we shouldn't mess with it, although we did. (Chuckles) And Pundy [i.e., Masaru Yokouchi] was involved. I mean, there were some---we called meetings and had the total staff come out to bare their souls and try to explain what it was that was affecting them and their grievances. And we went through several exercises like that. I remember being asked by Naomi to sit on a personnel committee to evaluate Sarah, partly because by then they thought that I was more reasonable than Dennis, but [also] that I represented kind of a staff point of view. And so I could bring that into the deliberations of how to advise Sarah or how to evaluate her.

JR: About the same time Sarah Richards came aboard, they had to absorb the humanities.

FO: Yeah.

JR: The Hawai'i Foundation for History and the Humanities [HFHH] . . .

FO: Right.

JR: . . . was dissolved [in 1980], and then the state foundation assumed some of those responsibilities. Now, you come from the humanities . . .

FO: Yeah, yeah.

JR: Did you see that as a special area of concern for yourself?

FO: Well, yes and no. When you assume responsibility for a total agency, then you cannot—then you cease being an advocate for one area. I had known about HFHH. . . . Is that it? Hawai'i Foundation for History and the Humanities, right? Okay.

(Laughter)

FO: We're getting the thing right here. And actually, Ethnic Studies [Program] had been involved in probably getting it abolished before I was on board, particularly with the oral history stuff. So the [Center for] Oral History [formerly the Ethnic Studies Oral History Project], I think, emerged partly as a result of—it was tied in to the demise of HFHH.

JR: Why would the Ethnic Studies [Program] have an interest in dissolving the HFHH?

FO: Well, because the funding for the [Center for] Oral History originally went to

Ethnic Studies Program via HFHH. And there were lots of problems between the Oral History Project, as it operated out of Ethnic Studies, and HFHH and its director, and its board—different points of view, different styles of work, and so on. So I guess Ethnic Studies was not unhappy to see that group disappear.

Anyway, it turns out that when the legislature abolished the foundation [i.e., HFHH], they transferred some positions and some resources to the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, but not enough. And what Alfred [Preis], I think, did was to arbitrarily take some of those positions and use them in the overall agency's work, like taking a position for a specialist, humanities specialist, and turn it into a bookkeeper or an accountant or something which was essential for the work of the agency. But what it did was to rob the humanities side of the resources. And that's still a problem. And I did know that, so I did try to play a role in making sure that what underfunded resources that the humanities side had was not further eroded. And that was---rather than trying to build it up, I think it was more like defensive kind of work.

But I thought an allied thing, that I am happy to see did happen, was to build up the folk arts section. And that we did---there were attempts to work around Sarah, which frustrated her no doubt. But I did—and I told her, frankly—think that she was not sufficiently committed to a very important part of the agency, which was the folk arts side of it. So we did get that as a major part of the agency in a permanent fashion. And I do think that we did that, to a certain extent, in spite of her.

JR: Was that the result of a lobbying effort on the part of some of the board members, or people in the community, or a combination?

FO: Board, some of the staff, and the national-level people, NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] folks.

JR: That was established in '83.

FO: Something like that, yeah.

JR: What did you see the Folk Arts program accomplishing for the SFCA?

FO: Well, it was our major direct link to traditional cultural arts communities in all the various ethnic communities. And the person who was doing it, Lynn Martin, had a particularly enthusiastic and able, capable way of dealing with the native Hawaiian communities. So it was a really important, I think, message to the community, that SFCA was capable of and interested in and committed to working in a variety of media. And so that was important. You know, I think it helped us do many other things—increased funding for the arts as a whole—partly by making sure that perhaps the most important segment of the community in terms of public relations did not, in fact, become publicly hostile and an enemy to us. So it was important that SFCA be seen, perceived as a friend to native Hawaiian groups. And of course, we didn't accomplish that. But I think we did enough that it

made it impossible for people to paint us as complete enemies of Hawaiian culture.

JR: Which they did in some newspaper articles.

FO: Yeah, yes, which they tried. And I think what happened---like the Rocky Jensen kind of thing. [In a 1986 *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* article, Jensen claimed that the SFCA did not support or encourage native Hawaiian artists.] What people have told me is that whatever his *beefs* might have been—and you know he had some, I think, legitimate ones—with the agency, he could not convince very many people that we had no interest in or commitment to native Hawaiian arts and culture. Because just in folk arts alone we were supporting master apprentice programs, were providing a lot of staff time, resources, and funding into native Hawaiian cultural activities. So it just made it impossible for people to believe him.

JR: Something I wanted to get into later, but maybe you can talk about it now, was the general public and their perception of the agency. It's obviously important, but I'm not sure that many people have any idea of what the SFCA . . .

FO: Yeah, yeah. I'm convinced that---I don't know what the percentages might be, but if you did a poll it would be a very small percentage that really knows what we do.

JR: Is that a frustrating situation when you're on the board or the chairman on the board?

FO: Yeah. I think that the ideal situation is to have an informed citizenry. And so we did a lot to try to take the agency into different types of communities and to neighbor islands. We met---we made it a policy to take a board meeting to a neighbor island once a year, even though it was fairly expensive to do so, to send our staff people out to do acquisitions of works of art for public—Art in Public Places—tour the neighbor islands, you know, that kind of thing. And that, I think, was one of our problems. The definition of what is art and culture and the kinds of things we support were still so restricted that you still only—even if you traveled throughout the state, when your concept of what culture and art are is restricted, then your clientele is going to be restricted. So there are a number of ways of moving out of that. One is by discipline or by defining into your work, in an integral way, folk arts, and not saying it's peripheral, or it's lower, or it's primitive, or it's. . . . That was a very important message, so that you get folk arts devotees who are of Scottish descent or English descent. That cuts across ethnicity or race. So that's one way of doing it.

Then you go to neighbor islands, you take in regional kinds of things—crafts, or different types of art disciplines, media, video, film, things that are not usually seen, or different kinds of music. Or try to fund groups that are starting out in *taiko* drumming, rather than just the brass quintet. It's not that these things shouldn't be supported, it's that we need to expand the types of groups we can reach. So we did do some of that. I think the agency expanded a lot in the eighties.

JR: How does arts in education work into what you were just talking about?

FO: I think to this point, not very well. We do some things together. I mean, there are funds for hosting and exhibitions by student artists. But the DOE—the Department of Education—runs its own arts in education program. And we kind of have liaison with them, and we, I think, provide some funding for staff people who work in the DOE. But my sense of it is that it hasn't been as effective as it can be. And I think it needs. . . . It needs more advocacy. In my tenure, we had committees set up to investigate how you would try to make arts a more formal part of education—making sure that it's discipline based, that there's sequential art training, that it's not considered a frill. But it's very difficult. And looking at other states and how they're doing it, it's not so clear that you can really go very far in this. It's a very big challenge, because most people have the perception that if you do finger painting and stuff, it's taking time away from reading or math and science. So those things are much more important. And it's only when you can convince the public at large that the arts of all kinds play a role in discipline and everything else. And being a human being, it's important that you will get this. And we ain't nowhere near that. So that's been frustrating, I think.

JR: And what level would that advocacy have to come from?

FO: All over. I don't know, it needs some leadership. And I think maybe the. . . . I think there was some money that goes into—and I may be wrong about this. The DOE provides some funding for staff-level, upper-level management arts in education coordinator kind of positions. But it's very little, and it's inadequate to do very much. And that particular office has no authority to implement anything. The person can cajole, plead with, coordinate, provide some resources for teachers who are participating. But it may be that you need a very vocal person who can organize an advocacy group among parents, among artists, among students, to try to change some of the policies and offerings in the schools that can be taken and not penalize students. That is to say, you can take art appreciation or studio courses and have them count for something, rather than just be electives.

JR: What about things like Artists-in-the-Schools?

FO: Well, I think they do---I think that's good, but it's stopgap, you know. The artists, the poets, the writers, the painters—generally, you can't make a living doing that. So they're trying to do something else to make a living and they get—I mean, the resources are so inadequate that you can't. You may get a school with a poet once every fifteen years, if you want one, (chuckles) and/or a dancer or a dance troupe to come in maybe once a semester or something. How do you really get an appreciation for anything? As badly as I played the clarinet, at least I had to do it every day for half an hour or forty-five minutes. If you don't have that then it's really difficult. So I don't know. I think the answer is to get good people who know how to educate students, who have some training in the pedagogy, and who have an appreciation for the discipline they're supposed to teach, whether it's poetry or music, and hire them long term, even if it's part-time, with some kind of wage that makes it possible for them to live. Got to.

JR: Something that you sort of touched on was the art in the community at large. And

coming from ethnic studies, the question I wanted to ask you was about ethnicity and art. And you talked about when you were growing up, you had some awareness of Hawaiian activity and Japanese traditional practices. But what about in our community today, ethnicity and art?

FO: That's a big---that's a big area. It may be that at this point native Hawaiians have the most access to ethnic cultural practices and arts than any other group. There's quite a bit of stuff that's flourishing, and a lot of it just from grass-roots activity. I don't see a great deal. You have---well, there's some exceptions. I think the Okinawans do a very good job of this, of organizing cultural activities for the youth, and capitalizing on the smaller troupes or dance studios or music areas, and really encouraging this kind of thing to go on. But aside from them and the Hawaiians, I don't know. I don't see very much of it.

JR: When you were on the board, did you feel that it was a duty almost to try and balance the kinds of ethnic groups that you were supporting?

FO: In a broad sense, yes. There's no way you can say, "Well, now we have 20 percent this group. There's 25 percent Japanese and 27 percent Caucasians and 17 percent Hawaiians, so we should break up the thing that way." It doesn't work that way because you have different kinds of projects and proposals coming in from year to year. And we do have a mandate to try to look for quality and promise and that kind of thing, not just activity for activity's sake. But still, having said that, yeah, I think that I was particularly interested in trying to find balanced support for different sectors of the population. And then that was a matter of controversy, because not everybody felt that way.

JR: Well, there are some of them that will argue that we only have one indigenous culture, and you're not going to find it anywhere else in the world, so it's our first priority to deal with that culture.

FO: I'm actually sympathetic to that argument, so I thought that any legitimate native Hawaiian ventures that came before us ought to have some special consideration. But it's also true that we're not the only agency that deals with native Hawaiian peoples and cultures—OHA [Office of Hawaiian Affairs], now there's a major funding effort centered at the Bishop Museum, and independent kinds of agencies which cater specifically to native Hawaiian culture and arts activities. So SFCA wasn't trying to do it all on its own.

That argument fits not quite as well with the other groups. That is to say, there are not that many Japanese American, for example, groups that sponsor and fund Japanese American culture—arts and cultural activities. The Japanese as an ethnic group have more people in it, proportionally I guess, than native Hawaiian, say, or Filipinos, or Samoans, who are wealthier or middle-class or affluent. So some of that comes—gets taken care of on its own. But not all of it. I did think we---in terms of public support for the arts, there really was a need to broaden our base. So I was always in favor of taking a look at quality within the context of what communities were doing and what they were capable of doing.

JR: Is the hope to help fund Okinawan performances and so forth for the [sole benefit of the] Okinawan community? Or are you looking at a cross-pollination kind of thing?

FO: Oh both, both. But I will say, if you don't do the former, you can't do the latter. So to me the priority always has to be, you gotta have people involved in it who are doing it. And then the cross-pollination comes. But you can't just cross-pollinate nothing with nothing.

(Laughter)

JR: Well put. Another thing I wanted to ask you about was the [Hawai'i] Ethnic Records Survey. I think a national grant helped fund that.

FO: Yes, right. It was completed this past year. We did a conference workshop in March—February or March of this year wrapping it up. Two years we ran it. It's a grant secured from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission. Very important, I think. We surveyed native Hawaiian churches, we did Okinawan organizations, we did Chinese organizations, we did African American groups, we did Okinawan groups, we did some of the *naichi*-Japanese groups, and we did Filipino groups. Not all of 'em, not exhaustive, but found thousands of feet of records and some very important things.

JR: I think a question someone---we were talking earlier about the general public, the infamous general public. Someone in the general public might wonder what the organization that puts artwork in, say, [Lieutenant Governor] Ben Cayetano's office is doing, you know, rummaging around in African American community organizations' files and things like that. How do the two connect?

FO: The agency is mandated to take care of culture and arts and history and humanities. So the history and humanities---I guess the easy answer is to say, "Well, it fits into this history and humanities side."

JR: But beyond that.

FO: But generally, I think what we're supposed to do is to—the mission is to help perpetuate and promote arts. I think it's easier to just say cultural activities, broadly—activities of the mind and the spirit, and the human spirit, you know, things that are necessary beyond bread and work to allow us to live and perpetuate ourselves. To me, clearly one aspect of that general mission is to understand our own history, that we have diverse backgrounds and we have common elements that cut across, that there's exciting things in our backgrounds and people ought to know about them.

JR: Something else I was saving for later, but you just mentioned bread so I'm going to . . .

FO: Yeah, okay.

JR: If the money is there, it would make sense to spread it around and try to fund the arts and the humanities and the social programs. But suppose, for instance, that the budget is tight a particular year and the legislature and the governor have to make some decisions about who's gonna get what. As a member of the SFCA [State Foundation on Culture and the Arts] board, or the chairman even, how do you argue for art over . . .

FO: Over bread?

JR: Yeah.

FO: I don't know if you'd do that, you know. I don't know. I'd have to take a look at the situation. (Culture) involves employment. All our monies—all the monies that get funneled into cultural and artistic ventures—basically are used to pay people. There's some equipment purchases or CIP things—capital improvement projects, where you build buildings or whatever. But basically, the funds are used to employ people to do certain kinds of things, whether it's to teach people stuff or to administer another non-profit organization that brings people together to learn or participate in cultural activities. So that's bread, that's employment, and it generates taxes, it generates further economic activities. And a number of states have tried to use that as a major argument.

We did---the state foundation did a business economic impact survey some years ago [i.e., *The Economic Impact of Hawai'i's Non-Profit Arts and Cultural Organizations,* a study released in 1983]. And that was, I thought, a reasonably successful effort at convincing some people, anyway, that the arts are important for the economic activity that's generated as well. So that's one approach. But, you know, even in the depths of the depression, in the thirties, the WPA [Works Progress Administration] stuff—you had photographers, people painting. People, I think, understood. You need to document the human spirit. You need to see how people get through hard times. You need to be able to show people there's stuff going on in the mind. So it seems to me in hard times you make sure you don't just cut off some things that are going to be very difficult to regenerate. Like if you stop funding educational activities, you can't simply—for a period of years you let the physical plant run down, you fire teachers, you get rid of resources. And then three years later the recession ends. You say, "Okay, now we're gonna throw in $50 million." You can't just start it up again. These are not activities that can work like that. So it's very important to keep momentum going [to avoid] some kind of inertia. So, you know, that's what I would say.

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 20-20-1-90; SIDE ONE

JR: In 1986 you were named chairman of the [SFCA] board. Was that a surprise for you?

FO: Yeah, that was, very much so. The person in charge of the senate (committee), that was Charles Toguchi. And I don't know this for sure either, but my guess is that it was his suggestion to the governor that got me appointed chair. And I think it was a fairly surprising decision for many people. It was certainly surprising to me. When he told me about this, I said, "Well, you know, I don't know whether I really want to do this."

JR: The governor?

FO: No, Toguchi.

JR: Oh, Charles Toguchi.

FO: Yeah. And he said, "You're going to turn the governor down?"

I said, "Well, I might." (Chuckles) 'Cause I had some inkling of the difficulties. And I wasn't sure whether I was willing to commit the kind of energy and time that I knew would be necessary. But I did think---I mean, I knew that it was an area I had become increasingly interested in, and I thought it would be extraordinarily important in my work in ethnic studies. That is to say, getting ethnic studies to be more broadly defined to include cultural and artistic activities and not just political and economic and social-scientific stuff. So I saw that as an opportunity to try to make myself more intelligent about the whole scene. And I knew that it was an entree into the national scene. That I did know. And I was anxious to participate there.

JR: The national scene, meaning national arts organizations?

FO: Right, right. Well, specifically because we had hassled Naomi and Sarah on the trips and the numbers of trips they took to the Mainland to attend conferences and meetings of the consortium of the fifty states and six federal jurisdictions. And generally, Sarah and Naomi went to at least two of them a year. And I knew that was one of the jobs or the perks of being a chair. And that interested me, not so much traveling on trips but to be part of a national network of people experiencing and leading and guiding arts and cultural activities throughout the country. So that was exciting.

JR: So you did attend?

FO: Yeah, yeah.

JR: What were those meetings like? What were people talking about?

FO: Oh, lots of things. Cultural diversity was a major thing, of gaps between staffs and executive directors, the roles of the board. All the things that were crucial to us, other states and jurisdictions—Washington, D.C., or Guam, or Sāmoa—were involved in and were grappling with, too. So it was really an extraordinary kind of educational thing for me to go to these places and talk to other board chairs and

see how they tried to solve these problems. And there were workshops, and there were opportunities to meet other people. So for someone like myself who had been on the Mainland from 1957 through '78—twenty years—most of the time in ethnic and racial situations that were predominantly Black [versus] White, or [White versus] Chicano or native American, to come to—and then being in Hawai'i for ten years, you know—well, by that time eight years—and having focused almost exclusively on Hawai'i race relations things, it was time for me to try to take what I had learned here and be able to compare it with what was going on on the Mainland. So it was a very heady kind of experience.

JR: So how did Hawai'i compare?

FO: Well, in terms of per capita support, we pretty quickly emerged as number one in the country. So in terms of the legislature's support for general arts and cultural activities, we did better than anybody else. We were number two, I think, in the early eighties, and by the mid-eighties we were number one. And there are a number of problems in that kind of area. For example, line item—the monies that were allocated to the state foundation that were dispensed through a grants process. Those organizations that felt they had not had enough, not had access, or simply needed more, or had access to legislators, utilized the legislative process to get specific bills introduced for support. And many organizations did that—the symphony, smaller groups, canoeing—Polynesian Voyaging Society. Many, many groups did that.

And in many states the arts councils really made concerted efforts to keep that from happening, in order to, one, keep the decisions on cultural funding out of political hands, to keep that from becoming simply logrolling and pork barrel kind of action. And I think the legislature here had tried that at some point—increase the funding for the state foundation and encourage other groups not to go directly to the leg[islature] for funding. That didn't work here, partly because I think there is an inherently democratic kind of principle that you should always be able to go to the legislature for redress, right? And people are---politicians are politicians, so they have specific things they wanna take care of. So it was impossible to clamp down on that kind of activity. But it is a danger, I think. Then people with access to the legislature get funded, other people who do not, do not.

JR: Was that a frustrating lesson?

FO: No. For me, I thought that you can---the groups that can access specific senators or representatives and get support, terrific. Go do that. But give us a break. Make sure that the grants-in-aid kind of process or the financing of other groups get particular attention, you know. I think in---as a basic policy it's not a good one. And if we could get the legislature to fund the state foundation more adequately and indicate that there are some operating expenses or things that the Bishop Museum needs, for example. Being designated as state museum and having a million-plus [dollars] funneled into the Bishop Museum, there ought to be a way in which, rather than the museum having to make a case before the whole state legislature, coming before the agency. And other museums similarly being able to

ask for operating support on an ongoing basis, 'cause there's no reason why the Bishop Museum should be the only designated state museum. And I think the Bishop Museum people would agree.

JR: Were you active as a lobbyist for the SFCA at the legislature during your tenure?

FO: Yeah, as a chair I was. The board was not particularly helpful to Naomi or Sarah in the early period. And part of it---they were catching a lot of hell from [Senator] Duke Kawasaki and it made it. . . . I think for us, it was difficult to wholeheartedly support what was going on. That was one kind of underlying problem, that had we been asked—had we sat at a table and been grilled by Duke or somebody else who was critical of the agency, well, we might not have been able to answer in the way that would be helpful to the agency, in being honest. So I think some of us stayed away. It was seen—appropriately, I think—as something of a lack of support for the agency at the time.

When I took over as chair, we did a better job, I think. The board as a whole---one of the things that I think happened was the board got galvanized. There were no dissidents left. And to that extent, I think we really were able to bring a united front. There were disagreements and stuff, but basically when we wanted our people to come out to hearings before committees, we could bring out three or four out of the nine people [i.e., board members] fairly consistently. And that was a big change over the previous years. So that was---that reflected a change in the composition of the board, and the attitude of the board, and the relationship of the board to Sarah.

JR: I'm gonna review—paraphrase rather—something you said when you were appointed chairman. It's short. You had said that the board would take a more active role in the foundation's activities. And that was in response to questions about problems with the staff and Sarah Richards and things like that. What is the board's role?

FO: The board's role is almost whatever it wants to make it, you know. It's very broadly defined. And what I came to understand—and that was one of the nice things about going to the National Assembly [of State Arts Agencies], NASAA—is that the board chairs and the boards have enormous power in this, and they can direct boards into a great deal of activity or none at all. When Alfred [Preis] was ED, was executive director, my understanding is that the board generally rubber-stamped everything he did, and I think people say that fairly openly. It began to change some, and Sarah stepped in just at the moment when they, in fact, were getting unhappy with Alfred. And so he was already beginning to reach the end of their rope on this. They were beginning to rein him in. And so it was part of the general democratization, I think, of the state foundation from an autocrat to a more democratically and popularly responsible agency. And when Bea Ranis came in, she—on her own, I think, rather than with a lot of the board members—she took it on her own to try to look into stuff that Sarah was doing or the staff was doing. Naomi, as I indicated, took a much more hands-off role, for the reasons I think I listed.

When I took over, I thought it was very important for, one, the board to be working fairly closely together. And so we did a lot of things by consensus, and we spent a lot of time. We had long meetings for many years, (chuckles) longer meetings than I really wanted to have, but it took time. And we needed that before any kind of action orientation, because what kind of actions do we take before we could agree on that? One major area was governance, I think—the relationship of the board to the executive director to the staff, internally; the board and its various members independently with legislators or community groups; the executive director with the legislature and community groups. Which community groups? Where does she make her presentations? Where is she publicly seen? All of those things were things we got into—retreats, workshops on leadership development, on morale building, team building. We did a lot of those things. And that, plus encouraging the board to be at more functions. Lobbying—you know, showing up at hearings when the SFCA bills were being discussed—I think was an important way of demonstrating to the leg[islature] that the board was behind the activities. And it turns out that's important in terms of funding.

People interpreted that statement as meaning that we would do something about Sarah. And I made it clear to her and to everybody I talked to that I didn't see my mission as doing something to or about her. Our job was to try to make the agency function better, and it had, obviously, some things that needed to be addressed. But the mandate was never to try to replace her, and nobody ever told me that.

JR: In talking about the national organizations, you mentioned something interesting [in a previous conversation] that I at least wanted to touch on, Sarah's helping you on the national level.

FO: Uh huh, yeah. I mean, that's part of the whole kind of assessment of her tenure, which was very long—eight years, I guess. And she's taken a lot of fire. But I think one area that really needs to be acknowledged that she did very good work in was helping Hawai'i function at the national level. And she did a very fine job in making sure that I got to meet people and have access to individuals and groups that eventually made decisions or got us into arenas where we could at least get our arts and culture organizations into position for competing for resources, not just the opera and the academy at the highest levels of NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] but local kinds of things. And I thought that was very helpful. And she did a really good job at doing that.

JR: I'm gonna give you a forum to talk about some of the highlights during your tenure as chairman. Do you think the foundation's direction was altered any by your influence?

FO: Well, I don't know if it's my influence, you know. It's hard to separate out these things. I think the times were changing. We were all caught in a period when accountability was becoming more important and demanded of us. We had to be able to account for what we were doing to increasing numbers of people in varieties of groups. So I think that's one of the things we had to do.

I think we got integrated into the national kinds of activities better. More people saw what we were doing, and I think that helped. Who knows what the direct connections are, but this year Darrell Lum got a $20,000 NEA Writers' Fellowship. Now, we've been talking to NEA and trying to push this kind of thing. Not Darrell, per se, but Asian American, Black American writers, artists of all kinds need to get supported. I think some of that is really happening, not enough, but some of it is really happening.

So that kind of stuff—for putting Hawai'i on the map, letting people know that we have a thriving art and culture community here—is important. Carrying out like that festival on the Smithsonian Mall, Pacific arts kinds of things—which they're gonna replicate here. [Hawai'i was the featured state in the Smithsonian Institution's Twenty-third Annual Festival of American Folklife held in Washington, D.C. in 1989. The Hawai'i portion of the festival was restaged in Honolulu in late 1990.] That was an enormous undertaking, and millions of people saw it. Now, I don't know where---I'm not sure if that's a really good thing for tourism or what, but of the people who come, they may spend some money on real arts and crafts. They may go to some of the museums that have genuine and traditional authentic cultural activities and real artists, rather than the schlock, you know, in some places that we have. So I think those things are good.

I think leadership---we have a ways to go, and I think the present board, with Millie [i.e., Millicent Kim], is really trying to address the issues of governance in a more systematic kind of fashion. And I think that will be solved, eventually. But those problems were developed over decades, so I don't know if one decade is enough.

But I don't think---you know, I guess your personal influence or your personal predilections or your values. . . . The whole multi-ethnic, multi-cultural thing, of course, was something I always had on the front burner. And, in fact, that is something that I got the national board to do. It was my initiative to set up a task force, took a look at this, took some readings from across the country, and came up with recommendations which were adopted by the board, the national board. How far this goes at each state level, I don't know. But the advocates of democratizing arts and culture among different ethnic groups will at least now have a document they can point to as saying the national group advocates this position. So that's all helpful, I think. And that part I feel pretty good about. The other stuff, I don't know. I think, in general, what we did was help create a climate in which the definition of cultural and artistic activities was broadened. And I think that helped make it possible for the legislature to fund increasing numbers of groups, even if it's as legislative add-ons, so that the total pool of resources available to the whole state community has been increased. And I think that's an important step. That kind of step is important.

JR: How did you feel when your tenure as chairman was up?

FO: Relieved.

(Laughter)

FO: I'm not interested in czardom. I mean, it was a---I was glad to have played a part in some really interesting things. And I learned a lot. And I think I learned stuff that I can take with me into ethnic studies or other spheres. So I'm grateful for that. And I learned a lot from the staff and from the other board members, from Sarah. And I didn't agree with all of 'em on everything, but that was great.

JR: What did you learn from your SFCA experience that would help you now with ethnic studies?

FO: Well, primarily that the need and the ability of human beings to incorporate what we broadly call cultural activities is a really crucial part of mobilizing and educating people. Not just in a manipulative kind of way—I don't mean guerilla theater to get people to vote one way.

(Laughter)

JR: Although you may have at some point.

FO: Yeah, but that's propaganda. And there's a place for propaganda. That's fine, you know, to do a certain kind of action, use ballads to evoke sympathy for whales, or do a mural to help the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. I mean, I support that kind of stuff, but that's propaganda. And that's fine. That has its place. But more importantly, to have people become—the empowerment thing that I spoke about. If you don't control your own culture, and your own vision of life, and your own participation in life, then you don't control anything. And that's what we're about. We're trying to---the true spirit of any kind of democracy is to have people be autonomous at the same time that they know that they're dependent on the community around them. And I think culture and art kinds of activities are one, not the only, but one really exciting and important way of doing that. So they have a value in and of themselves. That is, you go to a concert or you go to a dance performance and you can really appreciate the beauty of whatever is being done on its own. But it also has another dimension of bringing people together, making them appreciate, one, their own tradition, whatever that tradition is. And then, as you say, the cross-pollination, you know, of being able to appreciate other peoples, too.

So that part of it, I think, in those eight years [with the SFCA] really got solidified. And I could see it at work in North Carolina, could see it in Maine. I could see it in Canada. You can see people doing these things and succeeding at it, and other people being beaten down and, you know, doing it again, trying again. So there's something about. . . . It's like Eastern Europe or Central Europe. That you can have centuries or decades of repression and it'll happen, people will. . . . It was a very, for me, empowering kind of experience to know and then to reflect back on other things I've read, just to see people continuing to struggle and to do things. So that was good.

JR: Okay. Thanks a lot.

FO: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

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An Oral History

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